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### View from the Cockpit

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# View from the Cockpit



**Retired Marine Corps jet pilot David Wilson '70 gives a firsthand glimpse into aviation history.**

**Story by TIM OBERMILLER & SARAH (ZELLER) JULIAN '07**  
**Portrait photo by MARC FEATHERLY**

During their first week at Illinois Wesleyan, six first-year students explored aviation history guided by David Wilson, an alumnus who has lived his own share of that history as a Marine Corps jet pilot.

Among several options, the six students chose Bloomington's Prairie Aviation Museum (PAM) to work on Mission Day, a part of New Student Orientation where new Titans get a chance to connect to the community and to older alumni. After tidying up the museum's many displays, the six were invited by Wilson to sit inside the cockpit of the museum's A-4M Skyhawk — the same aircraft type he flew in the early 1970s as a member of Marine Attack Squadron 331 (VMA-331), known as the "Bumblebees."

Wilson brought along something special for students to wear as they sat in the cockpit and posed for photos. It was the helmet issued to him when he started flight training 43 years ago in Pensacola, Fla.

The experience of climbing into a cockpit of a tactical jet aircraft, says Wilson, gives "an entirely different perspective of what it must be like to be a military pilot, from the 'inside looking out.'"

PAM's A-4M Skyhawk arrived in Bloomington in late 2000, on permanent loan from Pensacola's National Museum of Naval Aviation. "Having the same type of aircraft as part of our museum air park is a dream come true for me," he says. Since 2000, Wilson has volunteered at PAM as the Skyhawk's "unofficial docent," along with Chuck Sprietsma, a Bloomington resident and fellow retired Marine pilot who flew the actual plane on display at the museum.

Wilson was later able to track down a Skyhawk he had flown in the service. Checking several sources, he confirmed that it is currently on static display at the Wings of Freedom Museum in Horsham, Pa. "I hope to get out there someday to get reacquainted."

"There doesn't appear to be many A-4M aircraft remaining," Wilson adds. Flown exclusively by the Marines, only 160 A-4M models were built, with the last one delivered to VMA-331 in early 1979. The Skyhawks were specifically designed to fulfill a need for a Navy and Marine attack aircraft that could operate from aircraft carriers and also provide close air support from short airstrips close to the front lines. It was produced for 27 years, making it the longest production run for any American tactical aircraft at that time.



**Wilson's wife Barbara '70 pins his Naval Aviator wings ("Wings of Gold") on January 18, 1972, at Naval Air Station Kingsville in Texas. The couple met at Illinois Wesleyan and wed a week after graduating.**

The Prairie Aviation Museum's Skyhawk exhibit brings back memories that trace back to Wilson's time at IWU, where he was a varsity athlete in track and football, a business major and a member of Sigma Chi. In college he also met Barbara (Grace) '70, who was a Kappa Kappa Delta. The couple wed a week after graduating.

"Civil rights, Vietnam and hippies all formed the backdrop to our world at that time," Wilson recalls.

"At the end of January 1968, the Viet Cong and NVA launched the Tet Offensive against South Vietnam," he continues. The media attention given to the war and action against the Marines at Khe Sanh were "likely triggers" leading him to "consider the Marine option."

"I had always admired Navy and Marine aviators and felt that it was time for me to exercise my patriotic duty," says Wilson, explaining how he initiated contact with a Marine Corps officer selection recruitment team on the IWU campus. After scoring well on an aviation aptitude test, he signed up for Marine Corps Officer Candidate School through the Platoon Leaders Class (Aviation) option, spending six weeks after his sophomore and junior years at the Marine Corps Base in Quantico, Va.

After graduating from IWU, Wilson was commissioned as a Marine second lieutenant. He earned his Naval Aviator wings in 1972 and requested assignment to an A-4M squadron based at Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort in South Carolina. He was later deployed to Norway for NATO exercises and also flew in Puerto Rico and California. Wilson was released from active duty in 1975 following additional duty as a jet flight instructor. He remained in the Marine Individual Ready Reserve until 1990, retiring with the rank of major.

Wilson enjoys bringing his personal knowledge of the Skyhawk aircraft to museum visitors. "Being involved at the Prairie Aviation Museum is very rewarding," he says. Lightweight and with a top speed of 673 mph, the A-4M "was a pilot's aircraft. When you strapped into the seat, it was like putting on a snug backpack. It was a very responsive aircraft and demanded a highly skilled driver."

He knows that many PAM visitors relate to the displayed planes mostly through movies such as *Top Gun*, which featured both the A-4 Skyhawk and the F-14D Tomcat (also represented at the museum). "I think *Top Gun* raised the bar and created a new buzz among the fighter and attack communities."

In tribute to Wilson and Sprietsma, both men's names and call signs have been painted on opposite sides of the museum's Skyhawk cockpit. Wilson concedes his own call sign, TITAN, may not be as flashy as "Maverick" (which the Tom Cruise character used in *Top Gun*) but says he was proud to use it as a tribute to his IWU experiences, past and present. In addition to hosting first-year students at the Prairie Aviation Museum, he and Barbara also regularly invite international students for dinners at their home.



**During "Open Cockpit Day," Wilson helps 4-year-old Caleb Troha try on a flight jacket issued to him in the 1970s. "During the Vietnam years, members of the military were not admired as much as today," notes Wilson. "Just the same, I did like to wear my flight jacket when home on leave." He adds that "it seems to have shrunk over the years!" (Photo by Marc Featherly)**

Wilson recently retired as the senior trust officer at COUNTRY Trust Bank, and Barbara retired as a third-grade teacher. David hopes to use the extra time to team up with Sprietsma to perfect the Skyhawk restoration. "We would love to get a few additional things to 'hang' on the aircraft," says Wilson, mentioning fuel drop tanks, bomb racks and rocket pods.

One thing you won't see the Skyhawk do is fly. "The A-4M we have at the museum is only a 'shell,'" he explains. "It does not have an engine and is missing many of the instrument panel gauges." Still, whenever he and Sprietsma get a chance to interact with the plane, both agree "that single seat, single engine aviation is the only real aviation," Wilson says with a smile.